



A Forum for Many Voices

by Robert McC. Adams
Secretary, Smithsonian Institution

During the past century museums have played an important role in democratizing access to knowledge about science, culture and the arts. For its part, the Smithsonian annually receives more than 25 million visitors to its museums and reaches millions more through its publications, travelling exhibitions, radio and television programs, courses, lectures and scholarly collaborations. New technologies promise increased access to Smithsonian holdings: interactive videodiscs, for example, now being developed in a laboratory on our campus may in the future bring exhibitions to homes and schools across the country and abroad.

This past year we have intensified our efforts to broaden the Smithsonian's audience so that it reflects the cultural diversity of our nation as a whole. The Office of the Committee for a Wider Audience and the Cultural Education Committee led by Regent Jeannine Smith Clark are seeking the means by which communities not heretofore served by the Institution might take their rightful place in its activities. Thus, the Smithsonian has begun to speak to new and broader audiences through its basic research, through exhibitions such as "Field to Factory" and through television programs like "Voices of Latin America."

While we hope such new audiences are receptive, we do not expect them to be passive. New audiences attracted to the Smithsonian can be expected to speak as well as listen. The mutual engagement of Smithsonian scholars and staff with members of various communities will benefit the cultural and scientific dialogue of our nation: new audiences can help structure how their history and culture are represented in public institutions like the Smithsonian; and they may share with us their cultural insights and accomplishments, their historical perspectives on the American experience, and their distinctive aesthetic sensibilities.

The Festival of American Folklife has long been involved in this effort. Each year members of varied and diverse ethnic, regional, tribal, linguistic and occupational communities come to the National Mall to share with the public the skill, artistry and knowledge which inform their cultural traditions. The Festival provides a forum for the representation of culture and is constructed through the interactions of scholars and tradition bearers, who in mutual dialogue agree upon the terms in which they both may be publicly represented and understood. At the Festival we reap the benefit of this dialogue — cultural wisdom framed by scholarly interpretation.

At this year's Festival, people speak to us from Michigan, Washington, D.C., and in several of America's many voices.

The Smithsonian has long counted on Washington area residents as an audience for its many museums and programs. In this first of a

planned multi-year program, tables are turned as traditional musicians from local Black, Hispanic and Asian American communities tell us about the social organizations and the multi-cultural urban context within which their aesthetic expressions flourish.

In a similar vein, the State of Michigan has helped us bring ninety of its residents to the Smithsonian to speak about and demonstrate some of the rich traditional culture from that region. To help create a festival setting in which performers of valued traditions can tell us about their experiences and heritages with performed music, active demonstrations and spoken words seems a most appropriate way to celebrate the sesquicentennial of that geographically endowed, historically important and culturally rich state.

America's Many Voices – the third in a series of cultural conservation programs begun in 1985 – addresses the importance of language in the preservation of cultural traditions. Spanish speakers from Texas, Chinese speakers from New York, Lao speakers from Virginia and Maryland, and English speakers from North Carolina challenge us, as audience, to hear the beauty of their voices, to understand the social significance of their languages, and to grasp meanings sometimes not easily translated.

Many of the Smithsonian's new audiences speak through the Festival. They have interesting things to say, and I urge you to listen.